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STAT

Does democracy need PR boost?

Later this month, details of President Reagan's proposed program to promote democracy around the world will be presented to Congress.

The president envisions a program that will support free labor movements, exchange of information, visitor exchanges, regional meetings and conferences and support for groups that promote good relations between the United States and other regions.

The program would reflect a commitment by the United States to engage more vigorously in a peaceful "competition of ideas and values" with the Soviet Union, President Reagan said when he unveiled the idea during a speech to the British Parliament last June.

For the most part, it would be directed at nations in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The cost: \$65 million.

So far, the main concern among many has been whether the CIA would be involved in the program, and Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger called a news conference earlier this week to dispel that impression.

Frankly, we are underwhelmed by the whole idea, regardless of which groups would or would not be involved.

Considering the economic climate in this country, we question the wisdom of spending so much money on worldwide public relations. Congress is presently considering the president's proposed 1983-84 budget. The question is not whether there will be a deficit in the budget, but rather how many billions of dollars the government will spend over and above the amount it receives.

Can we afford, then, to spend \$65 million to tell the world what a fine system of government we have?

And, beyond that, we are concerned with the general notion that it might be necessary to spend money promoting democracy. Over the years, this country has sought to spread the message by example. People could know democracy was the best form of government simply by looking at the United States and comparing it with other countries with other types of governments.

That may seem oversimplified in today's complex world, since the Soviet Union is not shy about telling the world of the virtues of its brand of communism. But it seems even more illogical to think we can spread democracy with a public relations campaign — propaganda might be a better word — no matter how much money we decide to spend.

The best way to promote democracy is to make the United States as great a nation as it can be. Showing, we think, is better than telling.